

Leaning

by

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Master of Fine Arts

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ABSTRACT

At its core, *Leaning* finds profound significance in unlikely moments of intimate detail; the upkeep of a brother's gravesite, for example, is as quietly important as rummaging through a collection of sex toys. Haiku-like in their simplicity, meditation, and declaration, these poems give meaning to the smallness of our world.

DEDICATION

I'd like to thank my committee for their unending support and incredible knowledge. To my cohort, to my friends: you've guided me through everything with extreme care and happiness. To Corey Campbell, to Arizona State University. To my family. To Michael. You're in everything I see.

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These poems, sometimes in different forms, have appeared in the following journals:

The Adroit Journal: “Ghost”

The Laureate: “Your Father”

Salt Hill: “Late Echo”

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REFERENCES

No references. The entirety of this document is an artistic synthesis, drawing on no source other than the poet's primary experience and knowledge.

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LETTER

I sit at my desk and let a passing shadow turn my arm gray
again and again. I did not make it to the chapel today.
The grand canyon wears snow in my dream like hats.
There is a stone tower there I see you circling—
You're kicking around for bones a hawk left cleanly.
But I know you: I found your handwriting jammed in my book.
You've opened a hole. Just tell me where you are.

There's no better way to say

a little ragged badge of light

you turn to me, mountains unfurling
in the window—

portico in the eye

two ducks in the pond are living
under no clouds

I lean against the flat rock of the headboard

a wheat field appears ablaze

He lies next to a woman in bed.

She whimpers
when she sleeps,
clicks her tongue like a cat, even flits her eyes
to show the whites tucked
in their lids.

Tomorrow,
they're going for coffee with green canaries
swinging from olive branches.

no

strange now I think of her shifting in bed

7:39AM
in another part of town

and her hair fanned
on the pillow

or getting washed in the sink:

a wet swirl of rope in a
bowl

*Woe to me,
woe to me he says in sleep,*

Down the ladder into the canal
he rakes for crayfish
at midnight

with a naked foot

and the steel lanterns
of Sky Harbor
thunder in.

She's half asleep.

Can you take me to the airport around eight
she whispers.

There's just enough light coming in. I hear
her breathing.

I hold her soft belly in my hand. She inflates
to my palm.

Is this OK I ask,
my eyelash in her back. She wiggles

and I hear her breathing and her eyes are closed.

Yes, of course.

Too soon
you will come to ask
what is my name
and I will not have an answer

a white plane slides overhead
with its tail logo even visible from here
and two SUV's curl past brightly

My partner's standing next to me
touching my shoulder

suddenly I ask your name too
but you haven't an answer either

too soon
you're asking us both for something
we cannot give to you

so you begin to leave
another white plane sliding overhead
the SUVs gone
the neighborhood deep in their windows

Too much work
to pick the hair
from the mouth

to pick the hair
off the tongue

at night things turn dark
and we tend to like them that way
she's shouting again next to the oak
hanging over the road
she's shouting again
at a loitering ghost
heavy in the grass
we listen and we measure and
we love her
but we cannot see her
fat in our own windows
pointing into the ink
our faces like white plates
gleaming

I've been shouting lately

about the cloud hanging above the mountain
I stand on.

How many lengths of arm will it take
to rip its belly

and bleed out the rain?

The space between is too brief a heaven.

How much longer will I stand here
balancing on this rock,

tossing my voice to the wind?

their song finally leaving
the idea at the grasp of his hand

like a blanket
the new calm covers him

before the beasts appear
with hardly a sound

they empty into the forest
he abruptly announces

out the window that morning
sharing a moment on the branch

like old friends
monkeying in the pines

one trilling to another

He thinks he'd die

no lakes, no rain,
all of it plucked from the rise and fall
of living

the boat tied up to the Olivares dock,
1,000 split fish in his memory

dried out.

Every winter he'd pull fish from the ice
like it were a magic trick

filling his cooler.

His foot caught in the hole,

broke like a branch;
he's drilling a hole thirty seasons ago,

he's squinting to see something
through the ice

*

back to the dark acres
beyond the last house
the rustling now shapeless,
children,
their eyes straining
to see one another

DOG

When I leave home she watches me
through the window with one dark marble of an eye

following the back of my head
and hears no sound other than feet

flattening the gravel as I go off to drink
in a place I don't much like

with friends who rest heavy palms on my shoulder,
recalling the worst of times

as if they're priests of childhood.
—And while I walk on I know she's still sitting there

behind the blinds, anxious as dogs will—
because she knows later I'll come in noisily as I often do

with heavy palms pawing at her head, boasting
dumbly of things she can't possibly understand:

of crawling on hand and knee through the purple dark
with a black light bulb held to the sand

so that I may find something out there—
anything to shock myself back to life before

I wake again.

badly still you want me here
to make new light of things:

to root for the cat stalking
outside the window,

to recall the grocer's face
from memory—

yet I'm eating alone again
at your dinner table

staring into the silverware,

hoping to recognize
my own face

FROM MY WINDOW I SEE HER READING

From my window I see her reading
a little blue bible in the orange
light of middle Arizona
where another evening has come,
another empty cup with cut lime
at my feet. I know the weight of my body now
in the haze of cheap gin and bowl of cold rice
tipped into the floor.

She doesn't see me one floor above
looking through the dirty glass window
down onto her—ready to reach outward
into the hot air and pull her up to me:
but she cannot know my face—
so out of breath and drugged,
so young for such shriveling, so full
of tired graces.

BIRTHDAY

I am 25,
following the sidewalk

through a neighborhood
I'm not familiar with—

yet my little flowers
follow me also, white

like a sail,

and this morning
I grow thoughtless.

The sun is
still waking up

behind the tree line:
daisies like burst

firecrackers,
bright eyes

along the fence.
A flock of birds overhead.

Gray dots
gathering on the wire

I HAVE THIS LIFE

I have this life:

 this quiet life

 paring strawberries in the kitchen

before my partner wakes,

 taking in Coltrane with the wine—

 and outside the wind bends its branches

and claws at the roof

 like a comb scratching at a bald head

 to straighten its last few hairs . . .

Yet I should have known better—

 a small knick in the finger

 means the red pinhole appears

like a trick.

 The sound—part jacked shingle,

 part yelp

strikes a match somewhere

 in her sleep

 and she turns herself over

adjusting to the noise

 while I hold a hot bleeding spark in my hand—

 (and the saxophone

is a part of this moment too,

 somewhere with her eyes closed

 tipping her wineglass into wind)

YOUR FATHER

watched from shore, solving our puzzle. Our tangled swim. Our Neil Young under the neighbor's dock—their tired boat. He whistled and my palm let you go. *Don't let it bring you down*, you said. *It's only castles burning*. And then nothing—only the sound of submarines surfacing.

A pale stalk of milkweed pipes from the dune and I draw a white tattoo down my arm in the breeze. She stands at the window.

+ + + +

I run down, and fall, and break my lung into the lake. The rain.

+ + + +

The lake opens up into a purple cloud and I shower there cupping my hands into a bowl, and watch a mosquito dig its thorn into my pubic bone. I streak it away.

A FIELD GUIDE TO WESTERN BIRDS

Standing in front of the window with my hands on my hips I see the olive trees
and the grackle flicking tail.
I woke this morning without a sound and thought of you leaning against me
with binoculars this time,
pointing out the window at a flash of feather or a wagging branch, saying, did you see that?
without turning to look at me.
Perhaps that part isn't worth mentioning—the thought of a thing rather than the heat of it
held against you—
but when I turned over in bed and woke without you with *A Field Guide to Western Birds*
sitting on my nightstand
the window opened and the birds began to shout wake up you fool
wake up wake up wake up.

AND THAT'S YOU DANCING

This morning an acorn fell from the tree
and nicked my ear, and that was that.

—Or maybe that wasn't that. Maybe
that was yesterday's acorn,

yesterday's flinch walking me back
into the house where I shook last

night off into the bed sheets and
fell asleep somewhere between a lead vest

and a pillow full of dirty feathers:
I woke to close the bedroom window

and in a yawning stretch my clasped hands
clacked against the ceiling fan

and suddenly
I was a burst engine, a hulking vowel.

The palace doors are swung wide open;
my penis is in plain view.

What I'm trying to say is: there is no
mirror without another thing inside of it.

What I'm trying to say is:
I literally have nothing I can give.

See, there's my hip. There's my elbow. There's
my cheekbone.

And that's you dancing. An on-camera gesture,
a wild, wild movement—

PETRICHOR

He photographed her in the doorway. Petrichor, she said. *It's called petrichor—that smell.* She was buglike in her sunglasses. But it was raining outside. Petrichor. It was dark. He photographed her stepping out of the rain, the fog on her glasses. She was reaching for camera. *I'm blind without them.* A blurred hand. (She meant her glasses.) She covered the lens.

He didn't ask. There was a housefly circling her head, the sauce in the Tupperware she carried. He photographed her. *Wet desert.* Her hair clung to her neck. *Water on soil.* She unbuttoned her shirt as she walked into the bedroom. She flicked on the light. *(So we can see.)* She took off her clothes. (She covered her eyes.)

THE SCORPION

I see
the scorpion skittering
in the grass,

and I lift it by the tail
to hang
in the hot air,

angry
as a sheriff
against my hand.

I'm slouched in bed
watching myself drift
out the window.

Drop it, you fool
I think,
but I cannot speak.

She enters the room
naked, a scorpion
dangling from her hand,

The thing tortured
and tired
against the brutal curiosity
that coaxes it.

I am stung.
And this is our struggle:
the pain we bring with our hands.

FAITH

I am taking off my glasses
for a better look into the white of the lamp:
a bug is caught and dies to loosen herself.

She throws her body around
to free the lampshade, to flick out the bulb.

She has gone insane.

Eyes like two golden mirrors, her body turns to filament.

One more minute of this,
the panic in the torture chamber. Such devotion.

A red bubble explodes inside her tiny brain;
my mind washing into alms.

LOVE POEM

I bought a handgun to hold
and walk through the desert with

when a thought burst
into me

I was loved once
by a few people

and still now by a few more
and often I think

of you
lying on the floor

with your head propped
up on your arm

but I stumbled in
violently at that moment

therefore ruining
the whole scene

the pistol unloaded but still
with the thought of you

caught on me like rain
and your face wet with the rain too

GUNNER

*Somebody is on the wing, somebody
Is wondering right at this moment
How to get rid of us, while we sleep.* - James Wright

Somebody is on the wing	a person
waking late and	waking slowly
yawning into afternoons	and stretching magnificently
in front of a window:	flexing
for nothing	so darkly.

A GREETING

When I made my phone call,
 After the door burst open,
 Before the final scene,

Like a first firm handshake
 A gunman entered a theater.
 When I had the two visions,

I went out to kill someone
 As a piano played beautifully.
 I could be stopped.

A plastic dinosaur melted on the dash.

TWO DREAMS

1

Lying down to sleep
in the salt pot's long shadow
the kiln draws its early heat,
licking a beetle into its late,
tight curl. Quiet pot.

2

—A barn fat with light:
the bright needle of its spine
throws a line through
the thick of a hanging cloud.
Hamada sits at the wheel
spinning his cup in the green dark
as the thatch of his roof sits
heavy in the glow.

DREAM

...I was a great bear with violet gums... - Rimbaud

You run naked through the cholla up into the mountain and into light. You swat the needles from your legs and see you're bleeding. You see your feet are broken—that you can't feel your legs tearing from the body. You crawl on your belly over the rocks. You see that you are bleeding badly. You crawl into the great shadow of a man.

THE CITY OF HALVES

In the city of Halves, there are mirrors. There are symmetrical things, things that can be split in two, things that come in pairs. It's perfect this way. There's fairness everywhere you look: faces are unblemished, food can be shared. Brothers have sisters and sisters have brothers. In the mirrors, the city doubles and the people recognize all that is good. They can see their roads leading in both directions. They see the trees, the earth; the light on all things and their place in it. The shadows crawling along the floor.

THE MAYOR

When Federico, the mayor, came to my door
I wasn't surprised,
nor when he plucked a joint
out from his breast pocket
and started smoking casually
in my living room.
"Nice place you got here,"
he mumbled in Italian
as he coolly looked around,
smoke dimming the house now.

He didn't think to offer me any,
but I didn't mind. I never minded.
I didn't care he propped
his heavy feet up onto the coffee table
or tapped ash into my wineglass.
Because this was Federico:
man of his word, man of many words—

"Tell me," he said,
"would you like to see him?"
Again, I wasn't surprised. "Yes, Federico," I said.
He undid his belt buckle, unbuttoned
his fly, and slid his Dockers down to his shins.
And there, amongst all the hair,
his short penis slept against thigh.

He made love to another man's wife while the oil palms and the orangutans in Borneo were split with machetes and ploughed down with heavy machines: her husband stood posing on a jagged stack of wood with a cigarette poking from his mouth and his left ear visibly missing while the photo on the night stand was taken—and she told him how she'd made it here and how the clouds hadn't cleared in days and how the rain washed her body away when things grew more violent—like a rowboat untethered on the riverbank—and she explained how he'd been gouged open with a pocket knife and how the dogs whined all night in Malaysia and their son was found murdered in the reeds—how his and her face were an inch apart and how everything was still dark at that hour, her husband still asleep somewhere, the plants and animals still . . .

CELLAR

She led me down to the cellar
when the high winds came,
yanking the trees
clean from their roots
over the black hill
and across the black lake.

We could have been out there.
We could have been
driving west out of town
when the falling telephone pole
pinned the two brothers to their windshield
in a terrible thundered hush
and broke them in 100 places
as the gasoline bloomed in the rain.

Their mother struggled to catch a bat
in the attic in beautiful, hot Modesto.

I've spent an entire day contemplating in detail
a museum I liked. All these sarcophagi and stuffed birds.
But really. This is the easiest way I know how
to find this city good. You texted me none of the details!
You should have thought about what you were doing!
Everything was like clouds appearing for the first time!
Like bells chiming when you'd forgotten they would!
Like a wedding, like a brother buried.

There he is turning five for us,
eyes like black glass in the candlelight,
a coin moon slotted between two oaks
out the window,
the refrigerator spitting ice.
My mother records
and ritually the rest of us: *make a wish!*
as he looks into the camera lens,
not us—
a thought like a firecracker
in his skull

GHOST

Would it be so bad if I followed the ambulance home
just to see what the body looks like

or is there nothing else but a few quick breaths
and tipped wine

is it so bad of me to want to see the other side
of the thing

to see into the past just a little bit
as if Coltrane walked off a bus and tipped his hat to you

or farmers tilling a field with a few bright tractors
and a flock of birds just above your head

is that so bad of me to wash down the street
with a bottle of Coke

to see again everything I've already lost
and to see the other headless men still searching

THIS HEAVEN

This heaven feels homeless and requires love more than ever now
As do the ten quail panicking in the shadow of an ironwood tree
As does the seashell locked in the cheek of a boulder outside my window
As does my neighbor leaning threateningly over the balcony railing
As do I on the toilet blowing smoke into the bathroom fan.
Today, in this heaven, it's been nine years since I've touched my brother's hair
And I stand above his body with water and shears to keep him clean
Like a springtime baptism in this velvet yard of the dead.
I wrap his heart in butcher paper and lay it on the dinner table,
Wash his hair with olive oil and rub him down with prayer
Until the long red shadow of death begins to move clear past my body again.

In heaven the night drive through the woods gets me to the smooth arena
Of the lake where I lay in its parking lot to think:
What will my portrait look like when I've closed my own door—
What boys'll come from the woodwork of my life to share a cigarette
And relate somehow to the blue shade of my eye—
To brother-magic and the death they've not yet touched?
In this heaven I balance a beer can on my brother's name as I work,
The dirt between us. A tickle of sweat reaching through my hair.

A HIGH, HIGH BRANCH

It is still early in the day. Sleep hangs on me
like bathwater:

 what do I mean
when I gash my name on a high, high branch
in this dream I'm dreaming?

I'm expecting a pair of panties to arrive in the mail
any day now.

The leaves are getting colder:
What do I mean when
each day I climb from the tree

and into the house
where I've been hanging bras on a hook?

The tree buds are locked in their bronze purses.
It is still early in the day.

OUT THE WINDOW

Two pigeons mash themselves into one another,
all body and feather, blank, many-eyed—
no coos, no secret footwork: just five or six seconds
before she's lost her balance and the whole thing stops.
Inside the house, a woman wraps a condom
in toilet paper and drops it into the trash.

One of the birds has left—which one she can't tell—
but the shiny neck of the one that remains sparkles in the light
as it jerks its head from side to side, eyeing her from across the balcony.

In the other room, her partner lies on his stomach
and stretches the starkness of his body across the bed—
his hands still tied to the bedpost.
He hums loudly a song she doesn't recognize.

AT THE RESTAURANT

I overhear the couple next to me whisper through the tines in their forks,
something about spit, someone's into pain—

watch me in the mirror, some tofu teriyaki. Here—try this:
listen carefully to the sound of my voice: I love you,

here, try this: listen carefully— obey.

They twist their silverware, spread things around.
They graze their fingers together lovingly,

each put a dinner mint in the mouth.

Let me get it
one says to the other as the check comes, reaching over—
both of them smiling.

Something about thank you. Something about you do as you're told.

TOY BOX

Tonight, she digs through the box of toys under her bed:

Wartenberg wheels, nipple clamps, plugs, cuffs, the thin braid of rope.

She feels the dark for a grip of her partner's hair, the slick of his teeth with her thumb:
paddle, ball gag, bedpost—plastic cocks with ten different settings, a purple bullet with a
button.

She snaps a match across a matchbook to light the fireplace in the room.

The house is bright. She feels the back of his neck.

Body tape, horse crop. Winter scarf.

BOUQUET

The underwear of the world
is dropped to the floor—

naked asses sashaying to the bathroom sink:
little deaths:

after sex, the glow

of the window dimming and darkened
and bashed out—

the underwear curled and shining,
twisted like ribbon,
oranges

and grays and reds, whites like the wines
and cheese in a crescent on the table,

here: did you want any more?
through the wall in the other room.

Some reclined, asleep, drawing slow
breaths,
and the others an inch

from the mirror—
the underwear

the underwear
like thrown flowers

MY FIRST BODY

Under the heavy layer of evening
my first body
pulls off his clothes.

I stand shyly and reach
to graze it,
the silk of his wet hair,
the sharp black edges

of his torso
with my small, pink hand.
He is like me. He isn't
like me:

His body is a bowl
of darkness.

I reach my hand in; I feel around
for anything I can
find.

THE SAXOPHONE

A nipple was tucked in the mouth. A finger disappeared in a tangle of its wire. Such strong hands the player had.

Music flung through air. As a child, I saw a musician put lipstick on before she played a show. She was good.

—And I had my own sax once. I stuffed a bag of pot in the neck and slit it under my bed. Never did I learn to properly hold it.

LATE ECHO

after John Ashbery

Upon observing my favorite flower—
Not a daisy—perhaps a daffodil—who really knows—
Only a curved stem remains in its vase. Only a spine.

It's the same old thing in the same way, John:
A gradual forgetting, a gradual putting off
Until the beehive dangling above the porch takes its place

In the astonished tremor of each day
Where even *that*, I think, is eventually lost.
And when a storm cloud slides over a house

Every summer, snuffing out the landscape, who am I?
Somehow vacant but somehow alive,
I'm stretched out on a hardwood floor in view of a window—

My heart a knocked glass of denture water.
Isn't there music? Where is everybody?
The drowse of the day booms its soft engines.

A daisy perhaps, or daffodil, bends in its vase.
The flower, even, falls out of love—
Its death only a leaning in the other direction.

DIE SLOW

die slow, I thought
a hundred ways:
slow to the hundred something lives
flashing at once
at the same radiance
as one another in a sunlight
under a cabin pressure
just inside
the wet coast of Michigan,
this flight to St. Paul:
the hundred something hearts clicking
in different rhythms—
a fist to a tiny grain:
slow to the pasture
in which the sun has risen—
the ox-bow lake brightly under us,
the flight attendant and her raspberry scarf,
this exhausting nod forward:
slow to my neighbor
who has fallen asleep, who rests
his head on my shoulder:
slow to those
who read this poem out loud:
slow to those who don't:
slow to this little astronaut,
little ghost, little life,
little black skeleton
walking over my knuckle
as I write

WITHOUT RAIN

In bed, after a month without rain, then another, and another—I kiss the back of Angie’s knee. She looks out the window, puzzled, as if a blue cloud suddenly appeared, dragging rain along the bluffs of broken rock as it quietly goes.

As we lie, the dog enters the room with her long, springing tongue, and she, too, looks out the window, then to me, then the window—a thought gaining traction. She curls to lick herself: first her rib, then between her legs, tasting the salt and dirt from the day.

The longer we lie here, the brighter the hour becomes, the further we can see. Over the mountain, a small white plane loses altitude and disappears behind it. I turn over. I stand up to kiss both their heads. After months without rain, I walk through the rooms.